

The apostolic witness is constituted explicitly as such by the christological assertion classically formulated as "Jesus is the Christ." However, the evidence provided by the New Testament writings requires us to recognize not only that this assertion was made explicit by means of a wide variety of formulations, of which even its classical formulation is only one, but also that, in the earliest stratum of Christian witness, it was apparently merely implied and not explicitly made at all.

As regards the second point, it is generally agreed that the only sources available to us for historical knowledge concerning Jesus and the origins of Christianity are the so-called synoptic gospels, i.e., the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. But literary and form criticism of these gospels has long since established beyond serious question that they themselves, as they have come down to us, are neither our earliest sources nor anything like straightforward historical sources at all, in the modern sense of the words. Rather, they are, in a broad sense, samples of the preaching and teaching—in a word: the witness—of certain segments of the Christian church during roughly the last quarter of the first century after Christ. Moreover, even the earlier sources of which the gospels are, in turn, redactions are at best secondary sources for the events they purport to be about, being primary sources solely for the faith and witness of the Christian communities to which we owe them. Significantly, however, in these very earliest sources—roughly speaking, the narrative pericopes of Mark and the sayings source commonly called "Q"—there is little or no explicit christology, in the sense of explicit claims about Jesus, his decisive meaning for us, his being in himself, and so on. This, of course, is why students of New Testament christology have increasingly come to the conclusion that the beginnings of explicit christology do not lie in Jesus' own witness, and perhaps not even in the witness of the earliest Christian community, but rather in the developing reflections on this earliest witness on the part of the early church. Thus, while the earliest stratum of witness is very definitely witness to Jesus, it is a witness to him in which he himself appears as a witness—not to himself but to the imminent coming of the rule of God, and to its gift and demand already present in his own witness. Even so, implied by this earliest witness—by the fact *that* it was borne as a witness of faith, even if not by *what* it explicitly asserted—was a definite claim for the decisive significance of Jesus

himself. To this extent, the developing christology of the early church consisted in more and more explicitly formulating, in some concepts and terms or other, the christological assertion already implied by the witness of the earliest community, as well as, presumably, by Jesus' own witness to the coming reign of God (as attested, e.g., by a saying like Lk 12:8 f.; cf. Mk 8:38).

But even taking all this into account, one must still recognize that the earliest and therefore properly apostolic witness, which is the real canon for all Christian witness and theology, is first constituted as such, as distinctively Christian witness, by the assertion, implicit or explicit, that Jesus is the Christ, or, more formally, is of decisive significance for human existence. Indeed, it is just because, or insofar as, this assertion is at least implicitly taken to be true that the Christian understanding of faith and of God is the kind of understanding it actually is. Conversely, because, or insofar as, Christians understand faith and God in the distinctive way they do, they also take to be true, if only implicitly, what is explicitly asserted in the constitutive christological assertion that Jesus is the Christ—whether or not it is formulated in these particular concepts and symbols or only in some other functionally equivalent and interchangeable formulation.

It lies in the nature of the case, then, that a *christology* of liberation, for which faith in Jesus Christ is understood as the answer to the question of human freedom, definitely belongs to any fully explicated *theology* of liberation. And this is so even if one feels constrained to hold, in keeping with what our sources disclose to have been true of the earliest and therefore canonical Christian witness, that an explicit christology quite properly follows the explications of faith and God, instead of preceding them.

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The christological assertion, in whatever formulation, is by way of making explicit the claim already at least implied in the earliest stratum of Christian witness, if not in the witness of Jesus himself. The point must be put this way because it is difficult to determine, given the sources on which we have to depend, to what extent the christology of the earliest community was itself more than merely implicit. Certainly, in the very earliest Jesus-

traditions, explicit christology appears to be absent; and it is striking that even in the synoptic gospels themselves there are only two places (Mt 18:6; 27:42) where anything is said about believing in Jesus himself, in the sense in which such faith is called for by the "Christ-kerygma" typical of the Gospel of John as well as the letters of Paul and most of the other New Testament writings. On the other hand, the form of kerygma that we find in the synoptic gospels themselves, as distinct from the earlier traditions of which they are redactions, clearly does involve the use of titles and other expressions of explicit christology, and so is not pure "Jesus-kerygma," but rather what Willi Marxsen distinguishes as the third or mixed form, "Jesus Christ-kerygma." Moreover, it is a reasonable inference that the experience and faith of at least some of the first disciples very soon came to be expressed not only by the *"that"* of their witness—as Marxsen argues it originally was—but also by its *"what,"* to the extent that they explicitly confessed that, by the resurrection, God had made the prophet and teacher Jesus of Nazareth Messiah or Son of Man and that as such he would soon come to judge and to save.

In any case, all formulations that either make or imply the christological assertion are formulations concerning Jesus that function to express his decisive significance for human existence. This they do by asserting or implying, in some concepts and terms or other, that he is the decisive re-presentation of ultimate reality in its meaning for us, and hence the explicit primal ontic source authorizing the authentic understanding of our existence in relation to this ultimate reality. Thus, whether christological formulations consist in ascribing honorific titles to Jesus or in making exalted claims concerning his otherworldly origin and destiny, the assertion they either make or imply is the existential-historical assertion that the understanding of human existence explicitly authorized through him is our authentic possibility of self-understanding in relation to ultimate reality.

But if this assertion thereby answers the question of who or what Jesus is, this is not the only question it answers. Precisely in asserting that Jesus is the decisive re-presentation of ultimate reality in its meaning for us, and hence the explicit primal ontic source of authentic self-understanding, it also answers another question having two integrally related aspects—namely,

who or what is the ultimate reality determining the meaning of our existence; and who or what are we given and called to be by this same ultimate reality. This question it also answers because it asserts specifically that the ultimate reality determining the meaning of our existence is the boundless love of God and that we are therefore given and called to exist in the obedience of faith in this love, which is to say, in unreserved trust in it and in unqualified loyalty to its cause. The assertion thereby implies, however, not only the properly metaphysical assertion that strictly ultimate reality is boundless love but also the properly moral assertion that we are so to act as to love all who are embraced by this boundless love, taking all of their needs into account in determining our concrete moral responsibilities.

This explains, then, why the question of the credibility of the christological formulation, "Jesus is the Liberator," is the question of the credibility of these other assertions, metaphysical and moral, that it necessarily implies. If it is credible, they, too must be credible; and unless they can be believed on the basis of our common human experience and reason, it cannot be believed on this basis, either.